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ABSTRACT

Intended to help parents and teachers select books for young people that reflect the actual interests of adolescents, this booklet discusses titles that both appeal to teenagers and help adults gain insight into their needs, their concerns, and their values. Titles of chapters in the booklet are as follows: (1) "Are Young Adult Books Literature?"; (2) "I Have a Problem: Realistic Fiction"; (3) "The Way Things Were: Historical Fiction"; (4) "On a Distant Galaxy: Science Fiction"; (5) "I'm in Love! The Teenage Romance"; (6) "Something Weird: The World of the Occult"; (7) "Batter Up! Sport Stories"; (8) "This Is Your Life: Biographies for Young Adults"; (9) "Information Please: Nonfiction Books"; and (10) "Some Notes on Censorship." A final note from the author as to the "sample" nature of the list of young adult literature titles discussed in this fastback concludes the booklet. (SKC)

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Serving Adolescents' Reading Interests Through Young Adult Literature

Lucy Fuchs

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Serving Adolescents' Reading Interests Through Young Adult Literature

by
Lucy Fuchs

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Introduction

Teenagers and books are not an odd couple once you get to know them. But teenagers are not always easy to get to know. When they are 12 they look forward to their next birthday, which will make them teenagers. But soon after they do not like to be called teenagers, nor do they like the term adolescents. They want to be called young adults because deep down what they want is to be part of the adult world and have the privileges that adults have. And, eventually, most of them do learn to accept the responsibilities of adulthood.

Why a fastback on adolescents' reading interests? For persons who care about teenagers, learning about their books is one way to get closer to them and to help them mature. They are still in their formative years, and what they read in those years is vital.

English teachers assign a wide variety of literary selections, everything from Shakespeare to *The Catcher in the Rye*. Yet students will claim that they do not like literature or do not like the particular books assigned. Listening to teenagers, one might get the idea that reading does not interest them, that they would rather do anything else. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, teenagers read a great deal. Certain young adult books sell in the millions. And it is young people themselves who purchase these books with money they have earned by babysitting or from a part-time job after school. Clearly, what one spends money for is a good indication of what one values.

We know that teenagers watch television less than either adults or younger children. The explanation is simple: The amount of television one watches is directly related to the amount of time one spends at home, and teenagers do not stay home if there is any place else to go. Adolescence is that phase of life when young people are trying to find themselves, and they are sure they cannot find themselves in their families. Rather, they search for themselves among their peers. *They also search for themselves in books.*

Publishers are attuned to the interests and concerns of young people and have created whole series of books for this market. Called young adult fiction, these books take adolescents' concerns seriously because they want to be taken seriously. Those of us who work with teenagers also must take both them and their books seriously. By becoming familiar with the kinds of books that appeal to teenagers, we gain insight into their needs, their concerns, and their values. And this can only help us in working with them.

Young adult literature also can be used in the classroom. Some titles can be taught directly in an English class. Others can be available in a classroom library for voluntary reading. Some might be recommended to particular students as bibliotherapy (see fastback 151 *Bibliotherapy: The Right Book at the Right Time*). Since young people are reading these books anyway, teachers should capitalize on their appeal and incorporate them into class discussions, writing assignments, and other instructional purposes.

The world of young adult literature is an exciting one. Everything that is found in today's adult books also can be found in young adult books. But there is a difference. Adolescents are still growing and learning. We should make sure that the books they are reading contribute to this growing and learning in positive and wholesome ways.

Are Young Adult Books Literature?

A high school sophomore reads all the way home on the school bus, he reads before supper, and he can barely restrain himself from reading at the supper table.

"I'm so glad you like literature," his mother says.

"I don't like literature," he answers, "I just like to read."

Somehow there is a notion in the minds of students as well as their parents that some types of books are "literature" and others are just plain reading. Books that are literature, according to this definition, are ones nobody would ever pick up and read voluntarily. You read them because they are assigned in an English class. They are usually too long, with boring descriptive passages, and have too much flowery language and too many difficult words. It is difficult to relate the characters and situations to one's daily life. Literature, defined in these terms, will be endured in English classes but will be put away and forgotten as soon as the course is over.

When we think of literature, certain authors immediately come to mind, with Shakespeare always leading the pack, but also Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and so many others. All of these authors clearly are worth reading, and their works appear on the Great Books list as well as recommended reading lists published by the National Council of Teachers of English and other professional organizations. These are the books with

which all educated persons supposedly should be acquainted. These are the books whose ideas have made a difference in the history of the human race.

The problem, however, is not with the literary classics but rather with their premature introduction to young people. No one questions the truly magnificent contributions of Shakespeare. One can see his plays over and over and always be delighted with this great master of the English language. But a 15-year-old reluctant reader will find it difficult to understand and appreciate Shakespeare when he must look up half the words and then learns that many of them are obscure forms no longer used. This too early introduction to the classics, more than anything else, is the reason why many young people reject the classics and thus cut short their literary career before it even begins. Of course, there are others who, even at a very early age, appreciate the poetry, the power, and the persuasiveness of great writing. Unfortunately, their number is not as large as we would like it to be. What then is to be done?

A realistic approach for teachers is to find books that will appeal and *speak* to students, with the initial goal being to get students to read. Students who today like to read Judy Blume's books will one day outgrow them and then go on to other books fulfilling other needs in their lives. But out of these satisfying early reading experiences will come the habit of reading. Reading is one addiction that teachers can condone.

A generation or more ago, millions of young people read the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series; their grandchildren still are reading them today. Although librarians and children's literature specialists dismiss these types of books because they are formula-written with cardboard characters and predictable plots, they endure for some very obvious reasons. Nancy Drew appeals to girls who are searching for some adventure in their lives. Nancy was "liberated" long before the word became a part of the feminist lexicon. She had her own car – a roadster convertible, of course – and her mother was dead and

not around to run her life. Nancy's relationship with her boyfriend Ned Nickerson never got beyond a chaste kiss, but exciting things were always happening to her. Can the Nancy Drew books be called literature? No. But they made readers out of many youngsters and still do.

Today's young adult literature has changed dramatically from the world of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. Topics once considered taboo in adolescent fiction, such as sex, abortion, homosexuality, rape, drugs, and alcohol, are central to the plots in some young adult books. Dialogue sometimes contains profanity. The teenagers in these books are real people with real problems. As we shall see in the next chapter, the teenage problem book has become a distinct genre in young adult fiction.

I Have a Problem: Realistic Fiction

Many books written today for young adults could be called "problem" books, which are centered on a particular problem that teenagers might encounter personally or among their peers. These books deal with interpersonal relationships, peer pressure, parents who do not understand or who get divorced or die; they deal with unsympathetic teachers and principals in schools that resemble prisons; they deal with drugs, alcohol, suicide, first sex, birth control, abortion, and homosexuality. As a group, these books are concerned with the adolescent's search for identity.

The best of these books, as well as telling a good story, help young people to put real problems in perspective and may give them the encouragement to cope with and perhaps solve the problem. The worst are little more than preaching about what adults think is appropriate behavior for young people.

One of the most popular authors for young people is Judy Blume. In one of her most popular books, *Forever*, she tells the story of an 18-year-old girl's first "real" love, including her first sexual experience. Katherine and Michael meet at a party. Before long they believe they are in love and start having sex, which is described quite graphically. When Katherine's grandmother (who comes across as a rather untypical grandmother) learns of Katherine and Michael's growing relationship, she sends her a packet of pamphlets that explain birth control methods and include information about where birth control

services are available. Katherine makes an appointment to visit the local birth control clinic. The story line follows the growing relationship of these two high school seniors during the school year, but when the summer comes they go their separate ways and the relationship falls apart. At the end both Katherine and Michael feel they have grown because of their experience together. They are now ready to move on and meet other people.

Katherine is 18 and a senior in high school. She has sex for the first time because she wants it and feels she is ready for it. Michael does not pressure her into it. Judy Blume receives hundreds of letters from readers of her books; and girls, many younger than Katherine, tell her that this book taught them how to handle sex and the conflicting emotions that accompany it. Yet some parents condemn this book for its graphic portrayal of sex and charge that it condones premarital sex. These same parents choose to ignore statisitics that show that at age 18, 44% of females and 64% of males are sexually active.

In addition to *Forever*, Blume has written about divorce, death of a parent, school problems, family relationships, and many other teenage problems. Because she writes with such understanding of and compassion for teenagers' problems, her books have great appeal. Teenagers believe when they read her books that they have found someone who really understands them. They see themselves in her books.

Another popular author for teenagers is Norma Klein. She is particularly interested in family and peer relations. In *Mom, the Wolfman, and Me*, she tells the story of a girl whose mother has never married and says she has no intention of ever getting married. The girl is quite comfortable with her single-parent family situation. But the day comes when her mother decides to marry; and with the advent of a new step-father on the scene, the girl is not so sure she wants her secure little world to change.

In other stories Klein deals with divorce, a new baby in a family, and in *Love Is One of the Choices* with first sex. Her approach is

far different from the romantic affair of Michael and Katherine in Judy Blume's *Forever*. The first sexual experiences of the two young women in her story are quite different. One chooses to have sex when she thinks she is ready for it, but she is definitely not ready to talk about "forever." The other young woman becomes infatuated with her teacher, they have sex, and the teacher's wife commits suicide after hearing about it. Klein is perhaps as interested in the dilemma of modern women as she is in exploring adolescent sex. Women can cling to romantic notions about love or they can take a realistic approach toward sex. In either case, they must still come to terms with marriage versus independence and children versus careers. Many parents may not approve of the solutions that Klein offers, but at least she is willing to examine the issues. And teenagers love her for it.

Teenagers also love Paul Zindel, ever since he wrote *The Pigman*. This is a touching story about a lonely boy and girl and an even lonelier old man with which many teenagers can identify. In *My Darling, My Hamburger* Zindel deals sensitively with boy-girl relationships, sex, and abortion. His books are always intriguing, forever interesting, and his characters become more and more zany. Still, students love him mostly because he is an entertaining writer. He portrays characters that may not be like students, but they can empathize with them.

Another writer popular with teenagers is Robert Cormier. Some of his books are read in high school English classes, but not without some controversies and censorship problems. The one most often read in high schools is *I Am the Cheese*; his *Chocolate War* also is very popular. His books treat serious issues of our time and deal with situations that are unlikely to exist in the lives of ordinary students, yet students are able to relate to the issues. Cormier's books usually stimulate intense discussions among students. Perhaps the discussions, which are likely to involve indictments of our society, are what concern the censors.

S. E. Hinton was a teenager when she wrote her first book, *The Outsiders*; and her books since then have attracted a teenage follow-

ing. Her books reiterate the themes of human and family relationships. It seems as if all the families in her books have parents who are either dead and gone or who are as much in need of help as their children. Some of Hinton's books that have been made into popular movies are *The Outsiders*, *Tex*, and *Rumble Fish*.

In contrast to S. E. Hinton's one-theme repertoire, M. E. Kerr's books cover a wide range of issues, and her characters are both ordinary and unusual. Her *Is That You, Miss Blue?* is set in a religious boarding school where most of the students have been sent because of family problems, which take many forms. Miss Blue, one of the best teachers at the school, claims to have had a vision of Christ; and she loses her job. The students, wiser than the administrators, support Miss Blue despite her eccentricities. They learn to accept her as they accept themselves. In *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* and *I'll Love You When You're More Like Me*, Kerr portrays young people who want desperately to develop a relationship with their parents or their friends. Dinky, who doesn't really shoot smack, will eventually learn to be herself and establish her own identity. And Wally Witherspoon will choose his own lifestyle and not the one his girfriend and his family are trying to impose on him.

The problem of teenage drug abuse has not been overlooked by young adult authors. Two books are especially noteworthy, although both are controversial. *Go Ask Alice* by Anonymous is written in the form of a diary of a young woman who becomes a drug addict. The diary entries begin as she starts with occasional use of drugs and follow her until she is so hooked that she no longer cares what she does to get drugs. The reader is caught up in her efforts to conquer her addiction and hopes that she will make it, but she does not. The last page tells us that a few weeks after the book was completed, she died from an overdose. The other book is *A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich* by Alice Childress. The central character in this book is a black teenager who lives in a slum area surrounded by the drug culture. Although he has supportive family members, the pull of the drug cul-

ture around him is strong. We hope he will make it, but by the end of the book we are not sure he will. Both these books carry chilling messages for teenagers.

Other books dealing with serious adolescent problems are Sandra Scoppetoni's *The Large Great Me*, about a young woman who becomes an alcoholic, and Fran Arrick's *Steffie Can't Come Out to Play*, about a 14-year-old girl who runs away from home to go to New York in search of a modeling job. She doesn't find a modeling job, but she is soon put to work on the streets as a teenage prostitute.

Not all authors who write for teenagers deal with the heavy issues of sex, drugs, and alcohol. One who takes a much lighter approach is Paula Danziger, who is particularly concerned with the junior high age level. Her young people have all the problems of young people everywhere, which at this age level is essentially the problem of growing up; but they at least allow you to laugh. In *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* one of her heroines is overweight and doesn't want to dress for gym. In *The Pistachio Prescription* another young lady solves her problems by eating pistachio nuts as a substitute for the understanding and help she craves from adults. Both these books treat serious issues that young people can understand, even as they laugh at the hilarious situations and crazy jokes.

Although most of the young adult problem-type books would not be taught directly in the English class (possible exceptions are some of Cormier's books and Zindel's *The Pigman*), they should be available in the classroom or school library for voluntary reading because students love them. One way to stimulate interest in these books is the five-minute reading pass-along. This requires that the teacher have a classroom collection of different paperbacks so that each student can have one. They are passed out and students are given five minutes to read their book. They are then passed on to another student who will read it for five minutes. In half an hour each student will have been introduced to six different books. Students may then choose a book to read from those they have sampled.

Not to be overlooked are the opportunities these books provide for related language arts activities, especially writing. Students get caught up in the characters and problem situations in these books and often react with strong emotions, even anger. What better way is there to let them express their feelings than through writing. The teacher can initiate writing by asking some lead questions: Were the actions of the main character justified? What would you have done in the same situation? Does the author portray young people realistically? Students also can be asked to compare two books dealing with a similar problem or compare the novel with its movie version. In creative writing classes students can write short stories using a teenage problem as the central plot device. The imaginative teacher will find many ways of using students' voluntary reading in the language arts curriculum.

The Way Things Were: Historical Fiction

Historical fiction presents a fascinating parade of heroes and heroines, of rulers and revolutions, of wars and weapons, of discoveries and disasters. It captures the lives of real people and the excitement of real events in a fictional world in which anything is possible. Unfortunately, many young people avoid reading historical fiction because to them history is nothing more than dates and dry facts about people and events in remote times and places. What they don't realize is that good historical fiction can enliven the pages of even the dullest history textbook. It can make young people believe they are actually living with figures from history and experiencing the events with which they are associated.

Historical fiction for young people must first of all be historically accurate. Serious writers of historical fiction carefully research the period they are writing about. They avoid romanticizing the past, and they are careful not to attribute 20th-century ideas and attitudes to the characters they are writing about. Besides providing a well-researched historical background, good writers of historical fiction know how to develop the full range of emotional qualities in their characters (love, hate, anger, jealousy, sorrow, hope, courage, etc.) so that today's teenagers can identify with them.

There are many excellent historical fiction books available for teenagers. Some examples about the ancient world are Lucile Morrison's *The Lost Queen of Egypt*, the story of the wife of the famous

King Tutankhamen; Eloise Jarvis McGraw's *Mara, Daughter of the Nile*, the story of a slave girl in Egypt who moves in the highest circles; or any of Olivia E. Coolidge's books, such as *Egyptian Adventures, Men of Athens, Roman People*, and *The King of Men*. Others from the ancient world are such favorites as Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Lantern Bearers* and Henry Reece's *Viking's Dream*.

From the medieval period, students will enjoy *Adam of the Road* and *I Will Adventure*, both by Elizabeth Janet Gray Vining. In *The Wonderful Winter* Marchette Chute takes the reader to the Renaissance period where one experiences Shakespeare's plays in 16th-century England. Eric Kelly's *The Trumpeter of Krakow* relates a historical incident in 15th-century Poland. The Newbery Award winner *I, Juan de Pareja* by Elizabeth Borton de Trevino is the story of the black slave of the 17th-century Spanish painter, Velazquez.

Moving into the Colonial Period in America, some favorites are *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* by Elizabeth George Speare and *Johnny Tremain* by Esther Forbes. A vivid portrayal of the Colonial Period including the Revolutionary War is *My Brother Sam Is Dead* by James Lincoln and Christopher Collier. The Civil War brings us *Rifles for Watie* by Harold Keith and *Jed* by Peter Burchard. *Fireweed* by Gillian Paton Walsh is about London during World War II.

Any of these books and many others that are available can be read and enjoyed on their own, or they can be assigned as supplemental reading in social studies classes. The teacher can introduce the books to the students, allow them to browse, and then ask them to select one to read. Students can then share what they have learned from reading the book in some creative way, such as posters, dioramas, dramatizations, drawings, or some other form of graphic or performing art.

The world of historical fiction offers many satisfying experiences to young adults, not the least of which is an intimate knowledge of the details of history that will stay with them long after they close the cover of a history textbook.

On a Distant Galaxy: Science Fiction

Although science fiction as a genre has been around for many years, it seems to be in ascendency these days, perhaps because of the popularity of such movies such as *2001*, the *Star Wars* series, *E.T.*, and many others. Hundreds of science fiction books are published every year, some dealing with our own future world in which technology has changed the nature of society, others dealing with worlds apart from our own where life may have some resemblance to our historical past but with some distinct differences.

Science fiction is fiction with a scientific bent. As fiction, it falls under the category of fantasy, although it often comes amazingly close to real life. As science, it uses technological wizardry, which, although farfetched, seems plausible since it is based on scientific premises. Science fiction is the most freewheeling of all fiction – anything is possible. Like few other genres of adolescent literature, it inspires the creative impulses in students.

There was a time when teachers were reluctant to recommend or to assign the reading of science fiction because so many of the published materials were poorly written, cheap pulp novels. For teachers who were trying to develop good taste in reading, such books were not deemed worthy of classroom time. Nevertheless, they were read avidly by millions of young people. Today, the situation has changed; there are some excellent, even classic, works of science fiction that are appropriate for young adults.

Two books commonly assigned in high schools, at least for advanced students, are *1984* by George Orwell and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. Both of these works depict a future when people's lives are radically different from what they are today. Orwell wrote *1984* in 1948; and when the actual year 1984 came and went, the world did not exactly resemble Orwell's vision, but some of his predictions about a totalitarian society were not far off the mark. *Brave New World* may be even closer to us than we would like to believe.

Visions of a future world are a common theme in science fiction. Often these involve humanoid creatures from outer space who invade Planet Earth. This is the theme of John Christopher's trilogy: *The White Mountain*, *The City of Gold and Lead*, and *The Pool of Fire*. Besides invasions from outer space, another theme is our own self-destruction, such as in Robert O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah*, about conditions on earth after a nuclear bomb explosion. The self-destruction theme also is found in science fiction books about computers and mind-controlling drugs. In Robert Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate*, we meet a character whose behavior is controlled by electrodes implanted in his brain.

The best science fiction authors not only deal with the visionary aspects of technology but also with moral and ethical issues. Among them are Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Heinlein, all of whom provide frightening visions of the future, which are not far from reality. Ursula K. LeGuin and Anne McCaffrey's books read like medieval tales, but the worlds they depict could be our own. And, of course, there is Frank Herbert's marvelous *Dune* series, which is a favorite of many students.

Some students are science fiction addicts and will read little else. For these students, a teacher will have little difficulty in motivating them to read. Other students are put off by the word "science" and prefer to read books that deal with characters and situations closer to their own lives.

Another factor that deters some students from reading and enjoying science fiction is the specialized vocabulary science fiction writers

make up to describe the unreal worlds of their imagination. Because many of these made-up words are based on Greek or Latin roots, a worthwhile activity is to have students figure out the meaning of the words by using the root words provided. A related activity would be for students to make up their own vocabulary to describe a fantasy world of the future and then write a story using this new vocabulary.

Science fiction definitely has a place in school and in students' recreational reading. It helps students to build vocabulary and serves as a stimulus for creative writing. It also lends itself to serious discussions about the moral and ethical implications of technological change on the lives of people. Science fiction may deal with worlds that do not exist, but it can truly help students to come to terms with a world that does.

I'm in Love! The Teenage Romance

The girl is so beautiful, the young man so handsome. They meet and look into each other's eyes and know that they are destined for each other. Problems arise, but the young lovers will overcome them. Love conquers all. This is the general synopsis, with only minor variations, of most teenage romance novels, a genre that has great appeal for girls.

These novels portray the kind of love teenage girls are looking for. Not only is the young man in the novel handsome, intelligent, and rich, but he appreciates the young woman. He may be worldly, arrogant, or easily angered; but his love for the young woman brings out all his tenderness. He speaks eloquently, telling the young woman what she has been waiting all her life to hear. He tells her he admires her beauty, her spirit, and her intellect. He talks to her about his work and his life and discusses poetry, music, and art with sensitivity. And he even is able to talk to her about his aspirations and fears. He really wants this young woman to share his life. This is the kind of hero teenage girls dream about. The boys sitting beside them in class could not begin to measure up.

Teenage girls turn to these books because they are looking for romance in their lives. By this time many have begun dating; some may even have a steady boyfriend. But somehow romance, or rather their idealized view of romance, has eluded them. These romance novels are read almost exclusively by teenage girls (and their mothers). One

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source estimates that some women spend as much as $150 a month on romance novels – a considerable sum given that they usually are published in inexpensive paperback editions. It has been said somewhat facetiously that perhaps it is young men who should be reading these romance novels to find out what girls expect from their boyfriends.

Romance novels are written for two markets: adult women and teenage girls. But high school girls are likely to read both kinds. Adult romances such as the Harlequin and Silhouette series have been around for many years, and millions of copies are sold. Teenage romances, sometimes referred to as "training bra romances," are a more recent phenomenon.

In contrast to the teenage romance novels, the young adult fiction by such writers as Norma Klein, Judy Blume, and M. E. Kerr uses romance as a device for showing adolescent readers a realistic view of human relationships and for developing self-understanding.

No doubt English teachers would prefer that girls read other kinds of books than these obviously formula-written romances. But given the fact that they are so popular with girls, teachers cannot dismiss them. They, along with soap operas on television, are a part of our popular culture. They are worthy of discussion time in class in order to examine their appeal and to compare their idealized and exaggerated notions of love with realistic male-female relationships. One possible outcome of such discussions is that students will come to realize that while "escape" literature of this type may be harmless, it may also give them a distorted view of life. Another possible outcome is that students will come to understand that an emotion as powerful as love involves more that the "sweet talk" of a handsome hero.

We can hope that teenage girls will outgrow the romance books and move on to more mature kinds of fiction, but we cannot ignore their need for romance in their lives. By accepting their reading choices at this sensitive age and by talking to them about what they have read, we can provide them with some perspective on love and life. In the final analysis, this is what they expect from adults whom they trust.

Something Weird: The World of the Occult

The occult is back in vogue, and many young people enjoy reading about it; others are frightened by it. Stories of the occult may raise the hairs on the back your neck and keep you awake at night, but you still keep on reading because the stories are so intriguing. Witness the popularity of Stephen King's books, many of which deal with the occult.

Stories of the occult deal with vampires such as Dracula and his kin, werewolves, zombies, and satanic rituals. Some deal with communicating with the dead through a medium or with ghosts that intrude on one's life. The occult is a world of seances, ouija boards, and all sorts of parapsychological phenomena. Evil spirits abound and must be defeated.

There are many books for teenagers dealing with the occult. Lois Duncan is one their favorite authors. She goes to the edge of the occult in such books as *Stranger with My Face*, *Summer of Fear*, and *Down a Dark Hall*. In each of these books, Duncan takes a well-known parapsychological phenomenon and carries it just a step further to create her plot device. In her books real evil is operating in the present world. Eventually, good overcomes evil – but not until the end of the book.

There are other books, such as Zilpha Snyder's *The Witches of Worm* and *The Headless Cupid*, which warn children about the occult. Such books are more likely to be on recommended reading lists in chil-

dren's literature books. But there are many other books on the occult that do not appear on any recommended reading list, yet are found on bookstore shelves and are purchased by thousands of teenagers. These are the young adult occult series such as "Twilight" and "Dark Forces." A typical example from these series is *Devil Wind* by Laurie Bridges and Paul Alexander, which entices the prospective reader with these words on the cover blurb:

> The day is perfect for sailing, so Peter and Mary Anne happily cast off from their New England hometown of Northport. They can't resist stopping in a mysterious cove that they have never visited together before. Then Peter shows Mary Anne the antique whistle he has found. When he lifts it to his lips and blows, its ominous tone is heard by a hideous evil buried for 300 years – a horror that rises with the wind and plunges their lives into a hellish nightmare. Together, summoning all the strength they have, they must escape a fate far more terrifying than death itself. . . .

How should a teacher approach books of the occult, which have such appeal to teenagers? In some comunities these books have been the subject of controversy. Because some of them deal with evil spirits and satanic rituals, some parents have charged that they are evil in themselves and contaminate anyone who reads them.

Regardless of how a teacher might feel about the appropriateness of occult books, it is futile to try to forbid students from reading them. They are reading them and that choice is theirs. Teachers might not want to recommend reading these books; but since students are reading them, a resourceful teacher can capitalize on this interest in a variety of ways.

Although, in today's scientific age, we tend to deny the existence of the world of the occult, belief in the occult and the strange occurrences surrounding it has persisted down through the centuries. Why is this so? Why have these beliefs persisted? Is the appeal of the occult today simply because everybody still loves a good ghost story? Or is there more to it? These questions could initiate a stimulating

class discussion. Or an interested student might want to research this topic from a historical perspective.

Since many occult books deal with evil spirits, another good discussion topic might be the nature of evil. Just what is evil? Does evil always come from without? Or might it come from within? If so, then what does this mean with regard to free will and individual responsibility? Students might be surprised to learn that their favorite occult book could generate such deep philosophical discussions.

Like romance novels, books of the occult have a wide following among some segments of the teenage population. By acknowledging their reading interests, we are encouraging students to continue reading. And for some students that in itself is an accomplishment. For others we can build on their current reading interests and redirect them to more mature kinds of books.

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Batter Up! Sport Stories

Sports stories are seldom great literature, but there are some students, especially boys, who will read no other kind of book. Many young people live for sports; some, it seems, go to school for no other reason. We can capitalize on this interest in sports by directing it to reading sports fiction and sports biographies. Even those with little interest in reading want to read about their favorite sport heroes and heroines. And there is much they can learn from this kind of book.

They will learn how a certain sports hero, coming from a background not so different from their own, achieved national acclaim, yet did not let success go to his head; he could still be a nice guy. They also will learn how sports heroes, despite their natural talents, had to overcome racial prejudice and other problems in order to achieve in their respective fields. The stories of Jackie Robinson and Jessie Owens have been an inspiration for many young black students. Hispanics admire Roberto Clemente because of the problems he overcame to achieve success and because he never ceased to care about others. Girls can read about their sports heroines, too, in books about Billy Jean King, Chris Evert, and Wilma Rudolph.

Students enjoy reading biographies of all kinds, but sports biographies are special. These persons achieved success by hard work and great effort. They had to be good. Some persons achieve success because they were born into the right family or because some fortunate circumstance thrust it upon them. No one thrusts the skills of athletes

on them. Their skills are perfected only after years of hard work and rigorous practice. They are the skills that must be demonstrated over and over again before millions of spectators.

Sports books definitely should be available in school and classroom libraries. They should be included on recommended reading lists, especially for sports-minded students who are reluctant readers. They may well be the only kind of book they will read voluntarily.

Sports fiction and sports biographies suggest many themes that are appropriate for discussions, debates, and writing assignments: coping with success and defeat, overcoming adversity, the power of will and determination, the threat of injury to a sports career, and many more. For budding writers, sports stories offer good models of descriptive writing and building tension in one's writing.

A final comment for the teacher who is not a sports fan: Because sports are so important to so many people, by showing at least a nominal interest in sports, you will get to know your students a little better. And if you read a sports biography yourself, you might be surprised how much you find yourself admiring that person.

This Is Your Life: Biographies for Young Adults

Teachers want their students to read biographies, and they have long been common reading fare for adolescents. Students find them interesting, if not always enjoyable.

Biographies, if well-written and thoroughly researched, can bring history alive as no history textbook can. By reading about the life of a real person who lived in ancient Rome, medieval Europe, or war-torn China in the Thirties, students vicariously can experience life in that period of history. Students also can learn something of how individuals shape their times and the times shape them. They can learn how individuals succeeded in spite of handicaps and flaws of character.

Teachers often recommend that students read biographies of persons associated with our national heritage. Some of these are about well-known historical figures; others are about little-known, but no less interesting, persons who figured in our nation's history. Below is a small sampling of favorite biographies that teachers encourage students to read.

Amos Fortune, Free Man by Elizabeth Yates is the story of a former slave who bought his freedom and then helped other slaves achieve theirs. *Poor Richard* by James Daugherty is about the life of Benjamin Franklin. *Man of Liberty: A Life of Thomas Jefferson* is by Leonard Wibberley. *Leader by Destiny* by Jeanette Eaton is about the life of George Washington. *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch* by Jean Lee Latham is about a young man in Salem in Colonial America. *Crazy*

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Horse by Shannon Garst is a sympathetic portrayal of a famous American Indian. *Booker T. Washington* by Shirley Graham is about the life of a famous black educator. *Ishi: Last of His Tribe* by Theodora Kroeber is about an Indian whose tribal life had disappeared. *Langston Hughes* by Milton Meltzer is about the famous black poet whose poems have inspired thousands of young people. *America's Paul Revere* by Esther Forbes is a well-written story of this great American patriot. *Invincible Louisa: The Story of the Author of Little Women* by Cornelia Meigs is about Louisa May Alcott. Of course, there are many, many others.

Social studies teachers might assign these biographies of American figures as supplementary reading when studying a particular historical period. Class discussions might focus on how the times in which these persons lived shaped them or what they would have been like had they lived in another time or place. Of course, they might be enjoyed even more as recreational reading. Biography has its own appeal.

English teachers often assign biographies as a distinct literary genre. Then they follow up by having students write a brief biography of someone they know or by having them write their own autobiographies. An interesting discussion question teachers might ask is: Would you rather read an autobiography or a biography of a person? What are the merits of each form of writing?

Students also will be interested in how authors write a biography. Where do they get their information? What kinds of records are available? For people who lived in ancient times, there may be very little prime source material available. For people who lived more recently, there may well be too much information to sift through. Then the author's problem is what to use and what to ignore. For contemporary biographies the author must decide what to do about oral testimony or interviews with relatives, friends, enemies, and acquaintances who still are alive. Is it possible to get unbiased opinions from these persons?

As we can see, biography is a versatile teaching tool. But its pedagogical uses should not subvert the reading of biography for sheer enjoyment.

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Information Please: Nonfiction Books

More than half of every library is nonfiction, written for every age level and covering almost any topic. From these books, students can learn new things or find out something they have been wondering about. Whatever the topic, there is probably a book about it. If the local library does not have a book on the topic, most librarians know where to get one.

But all information books are not equal. Some books are full of information and are delightful to read. Others are deadly dull and, even worse, inaccurate or blatantly biased. How then should nonfiction books be evaluated?

Without question, the most important criterion for any information book is accuracy. Without that, the book fails in its purpose. Related to accuracy is completeness. No book can cover every aspect of a topic; therefore, an author must decide how much detail to cover based on the intended audience of the book. For example, a book on astronomy for teenagers would look quite different from a book on astronomy for astronomers.

Related to the criteria of accuracy and completeness is that of currency. When selecting an information book, one should alway examine its copyright date. For certain topics this is crucial. For example, astronomers have made so many new discoveries about planets, stars, and galaxies in recent years that many otherwise excellent astronomy books are now outdated.

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Another criterion is the avoidance of bias. To be sure, authors, like all persons, have a right to their opinion; but they have an obligation to present both sides of an issue. They may argue a point of view and provide compelling reasons for it, but they owe it to their readers to indicate that this is their opinion and that not everyone might agree with them.

When selecting information books, students should examine how the book is organized. Some books have a detailed table of contents, which helps one to find the information easily; or the chapters are broken up with subsections with everything clearly marked. Others require that one read the entire book or a complete chapter to get the gist of what the author is presenting. Students should know that they must learn to use both kinds of books. Student also should look at the pictures, illustrations, and charts. There are still times when a picture is worth a thousand words.

Students should have access to a wide variety of nonfiction books related to topics discussed in social studies and science classes. They should be available in the library, or the teacher can bring them to class. A good activity is to have students compare two or more books on the same topic to see how different authors approach it. Also ask students to check copyright dates to see if the information might be out of date.

Students will need to become acquainted with the library's nonfiction collection because it provides the major source of information for reports and term papers they are writing. As students browse through the nonfiction shelves in the library, they will find books that are so interesting and so inviting that they will want to to read many of them, even when they do not have a report to write.

Some Notes on Censorship

Censorship is on the rise in the United States. Certain books, including some mentioned in this fastback, are banned in some school districts. Parents have banded together to protest the reading of *The Catcher in the Rye* and even *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and some school boards have eliminated these titles from recommended reading lists. In some cases a single vocal individual in a community has demanded that a book be removed from the school library or English class; and a frightened principal, librarian, or department head has acquiesced in order to avoid trouble. But there are better ways to handle censorship attacks than merely trying to avoid a controversy.

Censorship in any form is always frightening. Those who try to restrict what people may read are denying the right of intellectual and academic freedom. History has shown that when a dictator takes over a country, the first thing he does is ban certain reading material. Our country can be proud of the right to freedom of expression guaranteed by our Constitution.

Having said that, it must also be said that everyone exercises a certain form of censorship of one's personal reading, and parents exercise some censorship of their children's reading. People select certain books and reject others for various reasons. For example, one may simply not like certain authors or certain types of books. Or a parent

may want to keep their children from reading books they consider pornographic or racist. This is self-censorship.

The issue is not that all types of books must be available to all students; rather, it is whether an individual parent or pressure group shoud be allowed to determine what is appropriate for all students to read. We must respect the rights of parents who feel strongly that their children should not read certain books, but they must not be allowed to dictate the reading curriculum.

What can be done? First, there should be a great variety of books available in school or classroom libraries for students to read on their own. Having books on the shelves does not mean they will be read, but calling attention to them by demanding that they be banned will ensure that many teenagers will read them. For books assigned for class reading, it is usually best to have a committee make up the reading lists; and the committee should have a well-developed rationale for the selections included in the lists. Optional selections should be included for any of the titles considered to be controversial. Some school districts invite parents to serve on curriculum advisory committees so that their views may be represented.

When controversy does arise, teachers should make every effort to communicate with parents in order to find out what the specific objection is. Sometimes it is only a few words of profanity that offend a parent. Teachers can explain that, while they do not condone profanity, sometimes such language is central to the character in the book. The author is attempting to portray people the way they are. Or a parent might object to a book such as *Go Ask Alice*, charging that it encourages the use of drugs, even though the parent has not read it. Here a teacher can summarize the book for the parent and show how it carries a powerful anti-drug message. Remember, teachers must help to educate parents, too.

Teachers also must remember that community standards vary widely across this country. The kinds of books one is able to teach in California may not be considered acceptable in rural Iowa. What works in

the South may not work in the North. The schools belong to the community, and we must be sensitive to community sentiment.

When parents or pressure groups make a formal protest about either required readings or library titles, a school system should have written procedures adopted by the school board to handle these complaints. Some excellent models of written procedures are found in *The Schoolbook Protest Movement: 40 Questions and Answers* by Edward Jenkinson, published by Phi Delta Kappa.

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A Final Note from the Author

Given the space limitations of this fastback, one of my frustrations was selecting the young adult titles to include. For every title mentioned, there were at least 10 of equal quality and significance that could have been mentioned, including some of my favorites. This fastback, then, is only a sampler of the vast world of young adult literature. But if it succeeds in stimulating further interest in young people and their books, then it has been worth the effort.

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